

The Student Success Project: Helping students at-risk of failing or leaving a unit - A work in progress

Margot Duncan and Karen Nelson
Faculty of Information Technology, Queensland University of Technology

This “Nuts and Bolts” proposal addresses the conference topic of:
Schemes for monitoring and improving retention rates for first-year students

Introductory overview

In Semester 1 2007, a *Monitoring Student Engagement* study, conducted as part of the Enhancing Transition at Queensland University of Technology (ET@QUT) Project and extending earlier work in the Project by Arora (2006), aimed at mapping the processes and resources used at that time to identify, monitor and manage students in their first year who were at risk of leaving QUT (Shaw, 2007). This identified a lack of documentation of the processes and resources used and revealed an ad-hoc rather than holistic and systematic approach to monitoring student engagement. One of Shaw’s recommendations was to: “To introduce a centralised case management approach to student engagement” (p. 14). That provided the genesis for the Student Success Project that is being reported on here.

The aim of the Student Success Project is to trial, evaluate and ultimately establish holistic and systematic ways of helping students who appear to be at-risk of failing or withdrawing from a unit to persist and succeed. Students are profiled as being at-risk if they are absent from more than 2 tutorials in a row without contacting their tutor or if they fail to submit their first assignment. A Project Officer makes personal contact with these students to suggest ways they can get further assistance depending on their situation.

The project has a number of phases:

- Pilot Study 1 – Semester 2, 2007
- Pilot Study 2 – Semester 1, 2008
- The Institutional Study: Centralised case management - 2009-2010

Pilot Study 1 - 2007

This involved students in nine core first year units in the Faculty of Information Technology (FIT) at QUT. There were 259 instances of students being at-risk but this actually involved only 180 students because 33% of students were profiled as being at risk in more than one unit. Based on absences logged by tutors on the Faculty of Information Technology Student Information system (FITSIS) or performance in the first assignment or advice by the unit coordinator, the Project Officer then made contact with students. Contact was made between Weeks 6 and 11. If phone contact was successful, follow-up emails were also sent to the student to confirm the details of the phone conversation and to provide links and information about appropriate support services. If phone contact was not successful, a message was left where possible and an email was sent outlining the different support features of the unit and inviting the students to get in touch with the Project Officer for further help.

The major outcomes of Pilot Study 1 were that

- Twenty-eight students (representing 35 instances) initially profiled as at-risk had unenrolled before the Project Officer could make contact. Hence only 152 of the original 180 were contacted. Seventy-one (47%) responded, 81 did not.
- Of the 71 who responded, 62 were spoken to directly by phone, 9 replied to emails.
- The most common comment made in conversations and emails (14/73; 19%) related to students being unable to self-identify about having difficulties—they felt they were not having any problems and did not need to follow up on getting extra help.
- The group who went on to pass the unit had the highest percentage of students who replied to contact by the Project Officer (56%).
- The group with “Withdrawn Failure 0%” on their academic record and a HECS fee—perhaps the worst possible outcome for a student—had the lowest percentage of students who replied to contact by the Project Officer (28%).
- The group of students who had confirmed their enrolments for 2008 by December 2007 had the highest percentage of students who replied to contact by the Project Officer (42%).
- The group of students who had discontinued their course at QUT by December 2007 had the lowest percentage of students who replied to contact by the Project Officer (34%).

A number of significant obstacles were identified:

- Sessional tutorial staff were not able to access FITSIS at the beginning of semester when tracking was most critical, due to late appointments and the processing time of their contracts.
- FITSIS could only be accessed on campus and sessional staff could not easily get access to a computer on campus when they needed to log absences.
- Unit coordinators and/or sessional staff considered the task of logging absences into FITSIS as an extra job that was beyond the scope of tutors’ duties.
- Due to differences in unit design, unit assessment styles and due dates, each unit took a slightly different approach to identifying students at-risk. For example, within the same unit, some tutors recorded absences, some did not. In other units, only lack of assignment submission was used. And so on.

The major lessons learnt from Pilot Study 1 were that

- Personal contact seemed to make a difference and it was appreciated by students
- Contact in Week 6 and beyond was too late—should be made by no later than Week 4.
- Identification and contact procedures and the content of contact questions need to be standardised.

These and the identified obstacles were addressed in Pilot Study 2.

While preparing for this study, we became aware of the excellent work going on at Auckland University of Technology under the guidance of John Carlson (e.g. Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Scarborough, 2003). The very positive outcomes of that system-wide initiative has encouraged us to continue with a similar activity in a different context.

Pilot Study 2 - 2008

The changes introduced in this study were

- Tutors were no longer required to log absences in FITSIS. Instead Duty Tutors (senior students employed by the Faculty) were assigned to log the attendances.

- Instead of Project Officers, a Duty Tutor team comprised of 5 students and a Duty Tutor Coordinator conducted the outreach calls.
- A more comprehensive Case Management Database was developed in FITSIS that supported call logging and reporting.
- A QUT counsellor was appointed as a centralised contact for duty tutors when assisting any students with special difficulties.
- Cohort based calls were introduced to help build collegiality, communication and awareness of support for first year target groups.
- An ‘action plan’ approach was taken whereby an action plan for success was created during each consultation with students.

The Institutional Study: Centralised case management – 2009-2010

- Understandings gained from the Student Success Project Pilots 1 and 2 have highlighted key issues that need to be resolved and key advantages that can be gained through an institutional implementation of such an out-reach initiative.

References

- Arora, A (2006) “*As-is*” process modelling - Monitoring student engagement. Report prepared for the “Monitoring student engagement sub-project” of the Enhancing Transition at Queensland University of Technology (ET@QUT) Teaching and Learning Grant, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Available at <https://wiki.qut.edu.au/display/TIP/Selected+Reports>
- Carlson, J. (2006, July). *Supporting retention... A systematic intervention and monitoring programme*. Paper presented at the 9th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Gold Coast, Australia
- Carlson, J & Scarborough, J. (2003, July). *An integrated strategy for student service delivery to enhance the first year experience*. Paper presented at the 7th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.
- Shaw, N. (2007). *Monitoring student engagement sub-project report*. Report prepared as part of the Enhancing Transition at Queensland University of Technology (ET@QUT) Teaching and Learning Grant, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Available at <https://wiki.qut.edu.au/display/TIP/Selected+Reports>